

## JOHN 4:16: A DIFFICULT TEXT SPEECH ACT THEORETICALLY REVISITED

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### Abstract

*The very abrupt change in the conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well has presented exegetes with considerable problems in explaining it. This paper suggests that the application of speech act theory to the text of John 4:16 can perhaps offer a satisfactory explanation of this difficult verse. A few general principles of speech act theory are explained and applied to the text, and it is indicated how a speech act reading can enhance the current understanding of the text.*

### 1. Introduction

The dialogue between the protagonist of John's story, Jesus, and the woman of Samaria has intrigued scholars for many centuries, because of the subject matter, the way in which the incident is depicted and the occurrence of irony in the text. In general it can perhaps be stated that this story does not present exegetes with insurmountable problems. However, the same cannot be said of the interpretation of the very sudden and abrupt change of topic in the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4:16. The problematic nature of this break in the text is clearly reflected by the comments of various scholars, who differ markedly in their interpretations of this verse. A few examples will illustrate this: Carmichael (1980:338) and Eslinger (1987:178), who both contend that the scene at the well is loaded with sexual and marital overtones, state that this abrupt change would be inexplicable, were it not for the underlying marital theme. Olsson (1974:184) refers to a number of interpretations and concludes that most scholars read this utterance as a sort of 'leading' of the woman in which her faith is tested, her conscience awakened, and her loose living criticised. Bernard (1928:143) states that the abruptness is caused by the fact that we have only fragments of the original conversation and not the full conversation. O'Day (1986:66) suggests that the introduction of the woman's marital status is intended to shed further light on Jesus' person as revealer. Boers (1988:170) also sees this as a transition to prepare the woman for Jesus' miraculous abilities. Lindars (1972:185) contends that Jesus'

command indicates that he wants her to understand that he is not speaking about real water, while Morris (1981:264) and Hendriksen (1976:164) find the logic behind the utterance in the fact that the woman is a sinful person and that her sins must first be revealed before the dialogue can continue. Schnackenburg (1968:432) argues against this view and aligns himself more with the position that the introduction of this topic serves to illuminate Jesus' role as revealer.

From the above it is significant to note that while the interpreters have all tried to explain the logic of the introduction of the new theme, there have been no real explanations offered as to the manner in which the new topic is introduced. It is clear that a new topic is introduced in 4:16, but the fact remains that it is done in an extraordinary manner, which commentators so far have not been able to explain adequately. The abruptness and the sudden nature of this change of topic has been noted, but explanations seldom focus on the question of why the change is made in such a blunt manner, and not more gradually, despite the fact that this blunt manner immediately attracts attention.

The problem regarding 4:16 is best illustrated if the prior dialogue is scrutinised.

4:7 Jesus opens the discussion and asks for a drink of water.

4:8 The implied author explains the absence of Jesus' disciples.

4:9 The woman reacts negatively and points out the socio-cultural problems.

4:10 Jesus retaliates and suggests that if she had adequate knowledge, she would ask him for water, living water.

4:11f The woman questions Jesus' ability and his authority to provide her with this water, misunderstanding his reference to 'living water'.

4:13f Jesus explains fully what he means by living water by referring, *inter alia*, to eternal life.

4:15 The woman accepts that Jesus can provide her with this water, and indeed asks him to give this to her.

4:16 At this stage, while the question of water/living water has been debated since 4:7, the character Jesus suddenly commands the woman to fetch her husband. It is precisely this abrupt break in the text that creates the problems, since this command seems to be totally out of context.

In this article we will argue that the application of speech act theory to this particular text can possibly supply explanations of this difficult text, which up till now were not available to New Testament exegetes. What makes the solution we offer here attractive is that it is a relatively simple explanation, but one which inherently also allows for the possibilities mentioned by previous exegetes.

## 2. Some general principles

The application of speech act theory to biblical texts is, of course, not a new endeavour. Wendland (1985), Aurelio (1977), Arens (1982) and Du Plessis (1985) have all attempted this. More recently volume 41 of *Semeia* was devoted to speech act theory and biblical criticism. We will not offer a full discussion of the theory

here, but only explain some relevant principles and continue to apply the theory to our present text. (For an elaborate discussion of speech act theory see Pratt 1977, White 1988:1-24 and Botha 1989:68-90.)

When a conversation takes place between two participants it is assumed that both parties share certain knowledge or beliefs which make communication possible. Bach and Harnish (1979:5-6) called these beliefs MCB's or 'mutual contextual beliefs' which include knowledge of the specific speech situation, knowledge about their relative positions, cultural and social rules and traditions, presuppositions and so on. In addition, the following three assumptions must also be shared by participants engaged in a verbal exchange in order to make the communication successful. The 'linguistic assumption' (Bach & Harnish 1974:7) which means that the author of an utterance and the hearer are both able to handle the language used adequately. The 'communicative assumption' (Bach & Harnish 1979:7) is the assumption which requires that the intention of the author of an utterance is that his utterance would be understood, and the 'presumption of literalness' (Bach & Harnish (1979:61) is the presumption which postulates that if the speaker can be taken literally, he should be taken as speaking literally. Furthermore, any conversation is also governed by rules, which both parties in any exchange take to be in force. These rules to be observed are called in speech act theory appropriateness conditions or felicity conditions that must be met in order to make any communication effective and successful. Depending on the context, each speech situation has its own specific appropriateness conditions, but there are also more general and universal conditions which speakers must also observe in order to make communication possible. The general principle was called by Grice (1975:45) the 'cooperation principle' or CP, which is 'a rough general principle which participants will be expected... to observe, viz: make your conversation contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk-exchange in which you are engaged'.

Under the general principle Grice (1975:45-49) proposed four categories of maxims, or large general appropriateness conditions that are normally assumed to be in force in a normal conversation. The maxim of quantity which requires that a contribution is as economical as required - not more or less informative than is needed should be given; the maxim of quality in which sincerity is the key - the contribution should not be intentionally false, the maxim of relation which requires that a contribution must be relevant to the talk-exchange; and the maxim of manner which requires that the utterance must be perspicuous. Bach and Harnish (1979:63) follow Grice in this, but also add a maxim of sequencing, which requires that a contribution should be 'appropriate to that stage of the talk-exchange'. Participants in conversation normally assume that these principles/maxims are being observed mutually, and that the speech behaviour is governed by these rules.

However, it should be noted that these maxims can deliberately or unintentionally not be observed. In severe cases this non-fulfilment of a maxim can lead to the ultimate breakdown of the communication between the participants. However, in a literary speech situation this is not the case, and we can agree with Pratt (1977:163)

that whenever some kind of maxim is intentionally not observed, by characters or the narrator, the particular maxim is merely flouted by the implied author. Grice (1975:49) describes flouting and argues that this results in conversational implicature. In discussing this concept of conversational implicature McLaughlin (1984:32) states:

Conversational behaviour that appears to violate or blatantly flout the maxims ordinarily gives rise to speculation as to why the cooperative principle does not appear to be in force, and this state of affairs invites conversational implicature, broadly construed the engagement of a set of interpretive procedure designed to figure out just what the speaker is up to.

In a literary speech situation flouting is always valid for the communication between implicit author/narrator and implied reader/narratee. Whenever flouting has taken place the resultant problematic situation must be resolved by means of implicature on this level. However, it is possible that in literature the fictional character or speaker is failing to fulfil the CP in a fictional (re)construction of a verbal exchange. This failure of a character can result in the breaking off or failure of a conversation on the level on which the characters are interacting. But the CP between implied author and readers is of course not violated and the readers can also assume that it is not and 'it is this assumption which determines the implicatures by which we resolve the fictional speaker's violations at the level of our dealings with the author' (Pratt 1977:178). This invites the readers to calculate the implicatures arising from the character's deviant behaviour, and thus ensures enhanced communication between implied author and implied reader (see also Du Plessis (1988:311-324) regarding implicature in Luke).

The flouting of these above-mentioned maxims results in a number of so-called figures of speech such as metaphor, hyperbole, meiosis, and irony. In this respect speech act theory provides a novel way of looking at these phenomena and explaining and identifying them. In John, where we find a large number of ironies the insights of speech act theory can be of special significance in identifying and understanding this figure of speech (see Amante 1981; Schiffrin 1981, 1984; and Botha 1989:143-155).

### 3. A speech act reading of John 4:16

Keeping these general principles in mind, we can now turn to John 4:16. Whenever we refer to either Jesus or the Samaritan woman, we are referring not to the flesh and blood persons, but we refer to them as characters (personages) in John's story. For the sake of clarity we have in some instances added the term 'character' to the participants in John's account. An analysis of the conversation between Jesus and the woman in 4:7-15 reveals that the following principles can be seen to govern this particular exchange:

\* They both share enough and appropriate MCB's to make conversation possible.

\* They approach and deal with each other respectfully and politely (Botha 1989:106-155).

\* Both give signals that they are willing to keep up continued participation in the conversation, by, *inter alia*, turn-taking, observation of CP and maxims, and so on.

\* The CP and maxims (relevancy, clarity, quantity, quality, sequencing, etc.) have been observed in the dialogue leading up to 4:16.

\* The conversational position or status of the two participants has been determined by the conversation so far, and it seems that they treat each other as equals. The implied readers are aware, of course, that Jesus is more than a mere Jew, but the character of the woman does not know it, and only later in the conversation allows Jesus to assume a superior position.

Keeping the above in mind, by applying some of the principles of speech act theory to this scene, we can perhaps explain why the utterance of Jesus is so remarkable and conspicuous. In addition, we can perhaps also explain the dynamics of the conversation which led to this abrupt change in topic. To approach an explanation, it would perhaps be advisable to use a parallel conversation to elucidate some of the aspects involved.

Take for example two conversationalists who are engaged for some time in a discussion of a mutual colleague, who suddenly approaches A from the back and A says: 'Don't you think that Fred sometimes acts like an idiot?', to which B replies: 'I planted some shrubs yesterday.' In order to make sense of B's utterance A must, on the basis of assumptions about rules and principles of conversation which they both share, make a number of inferences. This is, of course, done automatically and subconsciously, but could perhaps be explained in the words of A as: 'B violated the maxim of relevance, but so far in the conversation he was very cooperative. For some reason B has chosen to flout the maxim, and therefore indicated that he does not want to pursue the topic any further. He is telling me he does not want to talk any more about this particular subject, and that I should follow his example.' If A turns around and sees Fred, the reason for B's flouting of the maxim will become clear to him.

It seems that Jesus' utterance in 4:16 can be explained in much the same way. So far the woman has shown that, despite the social and cultural difficulties, she is prepared to continue to interact with Jesus, especially in 4:15 where she grants Jesus a position of relative superiority and asks for the water he has to offer. She is willing to pursue the topic of the water. However, the situation and Jesus' full explanation in 4:13f make it quite clear that she is completely on the wrong track. Jesus is talking about spiritual matters, while she misunderstands him and thinks the reference is on the natural level to real water. This is clear from the reason she gives for wanting this: so that she does not need to come back again to fetch real water. As far as the character Jesus is concerned, the discussion so far is a failure - and he intends to terminate this specific line of discussion. However, the appropriateness conditions established for the discussion so far dictate that he should observe the politeness principle and keep the CP intact. Thus he can hardly criticise her openly for not

understanding, or terminate the conversation, without transgressing accepted conversational rules and appear extremely rude, and perhaps losing her continued participation. The character Jesus therefore has to follow another strategy and flouts the maxims of relevancy ('be relevant'), manner ('be perspicuous') and sequencing ('be appropriate to that stage of conversational behaviour'). It is exactly this flouting of three maxims that makes this utterance so conspicuous for readers and commentators.

The character Jesus does not want to pursue this issue (which the woman is clearly misunderstanding) any further and indicates this to her in a way which forces her to arrive at this by means of implicature. This 'break', created by the flouting of maxims, indicates to the other character that the current line of discussion should be terminated, and it gives Jesus the opportunity of continuing the conversation and introducing a new programme or topic. Because of the relative status granted to him by the woman in 4:15 he is able to take the initiative in introducing a new topic.

That the intended perlocution (to stop the woman pursuing the misunderstanding, and direct her to a new topic) does indeed become a realised perlocution is clear from her reply in 4:17 where she does not press Jesus again to provide her with the water, but rather acknowledges his refusal to continue the subject of the water, reacts to his newly introduced topic, and agrees to discuss the question of her husband(s). By flouting the maxims, the character Jesus has ensured that she realises that he is unwilling to continue the conversation on this level, and that he intends changing the topic. She is not severely criticised or affronted and thus it is ensured that the CP remains intact. This guarantees the continuation of the dialogue and ensures her (positive) participation.

On the level of the conversation between the implied author and implied readers (see Staley 1968:47-85, Culpepper 1987:15-44 and Botha 1989:97-105), this utterance where the maxims of relevance, manner and sequence were violated, confronts the implied readers with the same problems as the character of the woman. They also have to explain the violation of certain conversational rules by means of implicature. The only difference is that they are informed readers, knowledgeable about Jesus, his work and position, able to grasp subtle ironies and misunderstandings by characters (Culpepper 1987:161-165; Duke 1984:88-90; O'Day 1986). The effect of Jesus' utterance in 4:16 on the implied readers is slightly more extensive than the effect on the character of the woman, in the sense that it is a clear indication to them that her understanding so far is inadequate. The character of the woman is merely induced to change the topic, while the same speech act induces the readers, because of their knowledge of Jesus, to also provide a reason for the change in topic. The advantage for the communication between implied author and implied readers, in structuring the utterance in this way is, of course, to keep the readers involved in the narrative by forcing them into conversational implicatures. Their continued involvement and attention is necessary since from 4:16-26 on the crux of the dialogue with the woman is discussed and here their attention needs to be ensured. The fact that the woman understands Jesus wrongly is also evident for the implied readers, since in 4:13f the implied author gave a very clear explanation of what he/she is

talking about by indicating to the readers, via the utterance of Jesus in 4:16, that the woman made the wrong deductions. The implied author is thus ensuring that the readers do not make the same mistakes. If the protagonist Jesus, with whom the implied readers are identifying strongly, is not satisfied with her response in 4:15, it is a way of indicating to the implied readers that they should avoid a similar understanding, and their pre-knowledge about Jesus should help them to arrive at the right conclusions. They are actually called upon by the implied author to firmly establish the exact status of the dialogue so far, and to interpret Jesus' words correctly, before the next, very significant part of the dialogue develops. It is a most effective transitional technique of the implied author to enable the readers to correctly interpret information so far supplied and to ensure their continued participation of the implied readers, as the nature of the changed topic is not too clear. They can only be sure that the woman's interpretation is wrong and that they should not follow it, but to what exact topic the change is made, is not yet clear. This also invites continued attention, since the story is obviously not finished and a more satisfactory ending must still be anticipated.

#### **4. Conclusion**

From the above it is clear that the simple application of speech act theory to the text of John 4:16 can indeed help to clarify both why this utterance is so significant and why the change of topic is so abrupt. If one takes the two levels of conversation in the text into account it becomes clear how the speech acts on the level of the character serve to enhance the communication on the level of the interaction between implied author and implied readers. The explanation on the level of the characters is simple and logical, since it is a universal way in which conversationalists deal with language. On the level of the communication between the implied author and implied readers, this utterance is also very functional and facilitates the participation and evaluation of the implied readers in a way a simple change in topic could never achieve.

We can conclude that it seems that speech act theory is a very promising development in the study of language and language function, and can definitely contribute much to supplement traditional exegesis in arriving at a better understanding of the dynamics of the text of the Bible, as this example from John 4 clearly shows.

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